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A

heological Dissertation,

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A
THEOLOGICAL
DISSERTATION,
ON THE
PROPRIETY OF REMOVING
FROM THE
SEAT OF THE PESTILENCE:
PRESENTED TO THE PERUSAL
OF THE
SERIOUS INHABITANTS
OF
PHILADELPHIA AND NEW-YORK.

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*He that remaineth in the city shall die—by the pestilence:
but he that goeth forth—shall live. Jer. xxxviii. 2.*

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A

Theological Dissertation, &c.

AS our capital cities have, of late, been several times visited with the pestilential fever, whereby many thousands of their inhabitants have been carried away to the eternal world; it has been warmly agitated among professors of religion, whether it is consistent with revealed religion to remove from them during the time of this awful judgment or not. An investigation of this subject is now briefly attempted.

The question is not, "Whether we can fly from God?" Impressed with a deep sense of the divine omnipresence, we may say with the Psalmist, 'Whither shall I go from thy Spirit, or flee from thy presence.'

Neither is the question, "Whether the pestilential fever be a judgment from God?" The holy scriptures assure us that this is one of his judgments. 'I have sent among you the pestilence after the manner of Egypt,' Amos iv. 10. 'If I send a pestilence into that land, and pour out my fury in blood, to cut off from it man and beast,' Ezek. xiv. 19. Whether the American plague generates in our cities, or is imported from other places of the world, is all one to those who believe that all second causes are immediately under the direction of the First Cause. The Lord says, 'Shall there be [penal] evil in a city and I have not done it,' Amos iii. 6. Those who leave their habitations, and go to other places, where they suffer many hardships, and spend much of their substance, suffer no small part of the judgment, as well as those who stay in the place where the seat of the calamity is.

Yea the question is not, "What is the duty of every individual, where the pestilence rages?" Those who are seized with the disease ought to be duly attended, by such as can administer any comfort or relief. It appears shocking to nature, for friends to leave one another in such a time of distress. The poor, who cannot remove, nor do any thing

thing for their support during the time of the prevailing sickness and mortality, must be looked after, and spirited measures pursued (as there has been) for their relief; all this renders it necessary, that such as can be useful to their fellow creatures ought to remain. Those who stay upon such benevolent principles, surely deserve much credit. There is no situation in life in which all are bound to act alike. Even on public worship it is not the duty of every individual of a church to attend every time it is performed. This is one good rule for the right understanding of our duty at all times, "That what God forbids is at no time to be done; what he commands is always duty, and yet every particular duty is not to be done at all times."

The question precisely is, "What is the duty of those who live in a place where the pestilence is spreading? Should they not remove to a more healthy situation if it is in their power?"

We answer in the affirmative,—for the following reasons:

I. The sacred oracles require this. Matth. xxiv. 7. 'And there shall be famines and pestilences, and earthquakes, in diverse places.' Ver. 16.

'Then

‘ Then let them which be in Judea flee to the mountains.’ When the Lord poured out his anger in fire from heaven, upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, he ordered Lot and his family to fly to a place of safety, Gen. xix. 17. When he sent the fore judgment of hail mingled with fire upon the Egyptians, they were commanded to fly out of the field into their houses, and thus escape: accordingly those of the servants of Pharoah who feared the word of the Lord were preserved alive, while all the rest were destroyed, Exod. ix. 18,—21. The prophet Eliha ordered the woman whose son he mercifully raised from the dead, to arise and fly out of the land, when the seven years of famine were sent upon Israel as a judgment to punish their iniquities, 2 Kings viii. 1. 3.—Persecution for righteousness’ sake is a fore judgment; yet our Lord Jesus Christ says, ‘ When they persecute you in this city fly to another,’ Matth. x. 23. No doubt many have fallen into the hands of persecutors, and obtained the crown of martyrdom; but others fled without blemishing their characters. ‘ Many wandered about in sheep-skins and goat-skins, being destitute and afflicted; (of whom the world was not worthy) they wandered about in dens and caves of the earth, and all these obtained a GOOD REPORT, through faith,’ Heb. xi. 37,—39. In the time of the

the persecution raised by Ahab, Obadiah being in high office at that profligate court, hid an hundred prophets of the Lord in caves, and fed them with bread and water, 1 Kings iii. 3, 4. It was no reproach to these prophets that they did not stand their ground, and testify against the corruptions and wickedness that prevailed, but allowed themselves to be for some time buried alive. When the plague brake out at Chiavenna, 1563, Zanchius, an eminent reformer, left his pastoral charge, and with his family removed to a mountain for three months and a half. During the plague at Glasgow, 1647, the masters and students of the university removed to Irvine, by the advice and direction of the pious and learned Mr. David Dickson. The synod of the New England churches, in the last century, gave it as their opinion, “ That in times of epidemical
 “ contagion, the ministers of the gospel may by
 “ various methods attend to what is necessary to be
 “ attended to, without the ordinary visitations of
 “ infected chambers,—and that they should not run
 “ the risk of sacrificing their lives for the private
 “ service of the sick.” *

II. The

* Mathers's Hist. of N. England, Book V. p. 46.

II. The example of our Lord Jesus Christ warrants a flight from a place of danger. We are expressly told by an inspired writer, that ‘ Jesus ‘ would not walk in Jewry because the Jews sought ‘ to kill him,’ John vii. 1. On this passage the pious Mr. Henry comments—“ In times of imminent peril, it is not only allowable but commendable, to withdraw for our own safety and preservation, and to choose the service of those places which are least perilous, (Matth. xvi. 23.) ‘ Then, and not till then, are we called to lay down our lives, when we cannot save them without sin.” The learned Mr. Wislart, on this subject, thus expresses his sentiments: “ If in times of danger we neglect the means that the Lord in his goodness affords us for our safety, this is not to trust in his power, but to neglect it. Christ himself did not presume upon the power of God to secure him from the Jews, but used ordinary means for his preservation.”*

While we speak of following Christ’s example, we would not be understood as if we considered Christ’s example as the chief design of his divine mission.

* Wislart’s Theology, Vol. I. p. 221.

mission. This was doubtless to make an atonement for the sins of his chosen people. In his falling at last into the hands of his enemies, and permitting them to take away his life, he acted as our deliverer, not our example; but notwithstanding, he hath set us an example that we should follow his steps, in ordinary cases which are imitable by us. Hence we are taught, ‘ He that saith he abideth in him, ought himself also to walk even as he walked,’ 1 John ii. 6.

III. To remove from the seat of infectious disease is enjoined by the sixth precept of the moral law. This requires “ all lawful endeavours to preserve our own life, and the life of others.” To remain in such a situation, when it is in our power to remove, is tempting the Lord: when Satan tempted Christ, he desired him to cast himself down from a pinnacle of the temple, telling him, ‘ It is written, he shall give his angels charge concerning thee ;’ our Lord repelled the temptation, by telling him, ‘ It is written, thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God,’ Matth. iv. 7.

It must mar our confidence in prayer to God when we are in affliction, if we had any sinful hand, either directly or indirectly, in bringing it on ourselves. Staying in a place where the plague
is,

is, without some very weighty reason, is no less an act of temerity, than standing near an army engaged in battle, when one is exposed to danger by the bullets flying in all directions. The courage of the soldier is very different from the fool-hardiness of such a spectator.

If what is advanced be denied, then it must be wrong to make laws to prevent pestilential diseases being introduced,—to use any means to prevent spreading the infection,—to erect hospitals for receiving the sick, or to give any medical aid to them, because it might be alleged, that all these are fighting against the judgments of God.

Indeed this monstrous doctrine is no other than the Mahometan doctrine of Fate; by the belief of which, so many thousands of the Turks have fallen sacrifices to the plague; as their religion would not allow them to use means of preventing or flying from it. It will in like manner lead away from the use of the means of grace, under a notion that God's decrees are irreversible. But all arguments of this sort, in as far as they are pretended to be founded on the holy scripture, are very frivolous; whatever weight they may have with some, there are others who will allege that they deserve no other

other name than, "The maggots of corrupted texts."

The reader will perhaps think it now time to proceed to answer objections.

1st. "The Lord has fixed, in his eternal purpose, the precise time of our death, and therefore we need not fly from the pestilence, because we will not die till our time comes."

Answer. It must be granted, 'that our days are determined:' yet the Lord has, in his holy purposes, fixed the means and the end inseparably together. When Paul suffered shipwreck at Meletus, he was assured by an angel of God, that he and all that were in the ship should be saved; but this was connected with the use of lawful means for their preservation: therefore he told the centurion, when he saw the mariners about leaving the ship, 'That except they abode in the ship, (and used means of safety) they could not be saved,' Acts xxvii. 24. 21. It is a gross abuse of the doctrine of the divine decrees, to expect the end without the use of the appointed and ordinary means. We might as well argue, that if God has decreed that we shall live a year longer, then we shall live so long though we neither eat or drink. It is the doctrine of devils,

vils, to assert, that upon the supposition of a divine decree, we shall obtain the end, though the means be neglected. Matth. iv. 6.

As there are so many mistaken opinions about the divine decrees, it may be proper to observe, that they extend not only to all things which come to pass; ‘known unto God are all his works from ‘the beginning;’ but they extend to all possible things which shall not come to pass; yea, to all possible things and their possible connexion with these possible things, though God has determined that neither of these possible things shall come to pass. This may appear somewhat paradoxical, but a little attention to what is said in the unerring rule of righteousness, will illustrate it fully. When David was at Keilah, and sorely pursued by Saul, he asked the Lord, ‘Will the men of Keilah deliver me and my men into the hand of Saul; ‘and the Lord said, they will deliver thee up,’ 1 Sam. xxiii. 12. Though the Lord had determined that David should not fall into the hand of Saul, yet in the divine councils, there was a connexion fixed between his slaying at KEILAH and being delivered up into the hand of Saul. When Joash king of Israel came to pay his last visit to the prophet Elisha when dying, the prophet desired him
to

to take his arrows and smite upon the ground, which he did three times, and stayed : ‘ And the man of God was wroth with him, and said, Thou shouldest have smitten five or six times, then hadst thou smitten Syria, till thou hadst consumed it ; whereas now thou shalt smite Syria but thrice,’ 2 Kings xiii. 19.* The application of this doctrine to our purpose is obvious. That certain constitutions being exposed to an infectious disease, there may be a connexion fixed in taking the disease, and their dying in it ; and a connexion in their being continued in health and life in another situation.

Object. 2d. “ When the pestilence was sent under the Old Testament dispensation, we do not read of any flying from it ; why should we fly now ? ”

Answer. Under the Old Testament, when the people of Israel were guilty of some particular provocation, the pestilence was inflicted by the immediate hand of God. The case is not so now : The pestilence, which has made such ravages, certainly arises from natural causes ; whether it is imported or generated in our cities, it is all one
to

* Wisbart's Theol. Vol. II. pag. 80.

to this point. No doubt the Lord over-rules all secondary causes as he pleases; but as it comes in this way, the case now is by no means parallel with what it was under the law. Yet even under the law, the lepers were shut up in a separate house; and when the plague broke out in the camp, those who died of it were separated from those who were not infected. When fourteen thousand seven hundred were at once cut off by this dreadful malady, 'Aaron made an atonement for the people, and stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stayed,' Numb. xvi. 48.

The cannon of scripture being now completed, and the Christian religion having the broad seal of heaven appended to it, by the miracles which were wrought for its confirmation, it is not to be expected that the Lord will now appear in the miraculous way in which he has done, either in mercies or judgments. Notwithstanding of all this, it must be granted, that the various shapes in which the late fever has appeared; the insidious manner of its communication; the new modifications of it from year to year, so as to overthrow former theories about it, and confound the wisdom of the wise, do all loudly call upon us in this generation, to know
‘ that

‘ that GOD is the LORD ;’ and nothing down of an obduracy of heart like Pharoah’s, can keep any from saying, ‘ This is the finger of God,’ Exod. viii. 19.

Oject. 3d. “ Judgments are sent on account of
 “ the wickedness of a people ; then the wicked on-
 “ ly should fly, not the godly ; who if they stay,
 “ and fall in the common calamity, will make a
 “ blessed exchange of the present state for eternal
 “ glory.”

Answer. 1. It is true that it is the wickedness of our cities is the moral cause of our plagues. Thereby the Lord testifies his indignation against our grievous provocations ; particularly the awful profanation of his name and day, with the diffusive spread of atheism and infidelity. ‘ And if ye
 ‘ will walk contrary unto me, then will I also walk
 ‘ contrary unto you, and when ye are gathered to-
 ‘ gether within your cities, I will send the pesti-
 ‘ lence among you,’ Lev. xxxvi. 23,—25. Yet it is not the Lord’s ordinary way, to punish sin in this world according to its demerit. He punishes some sins in the present state, to shew that there is a God ; and passes by many, to evince the certainty of a judgment to come. It is a very dan-

gerous way to judge men to be the objects of the divine hatred by their afflictions: This was the error of Job's friends, who alleged that he was marked out by the Almighty as an hypocrite, because he inflicted sore afflictions upon him. Against all this pragmatistical judging our Lord Jesus Christ testifies, when he says, ' Think not that the men upon whom the tower of Siloam fell, were greater sinners than others; I tell you, Nay," Luke xiii. 4.

2. It is a very selfish religion that aims only at obtaining the happiness of heaven. It looks very unlike persons being formed for God himself, to shew forth his praise, when they only desire to be delivered from hell, and brought to enjoy eternal glory, without any concern about glorifying God on earth. ' The living, the living only shall praise thee, the fathers to the children shall make known thy truths,' Isa. xxxvii. 19.

3. It is not true that God always sends judgments on account of the openly profane. When the prophet Jonah fled from the presence of the Lord in a ship to Tarshish, though he was the only person on board that knew and worshipped the true God, yet merely on his account ' did the Lord
' send

‘ send a great wind into the sea, and there was a
‘ mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was
‘ like to be broken.’ Conscious of this, the rebellious prophet said to the mariners, ‘ Take me up,
‘ and cast me forth into the sea ; so shall the sea
‘ be calm unto you : for I know that for my sake
‘ this great tempest is upon you,’ Jonah i. 4. 12.

In following the light of divine revelation, we shall see that God often chastises his own professed people for sins which he would even pass by in those who make no profession of his name.

‘ You have I known of all the families of the earth,
‘ therefore will I punish you for all your iniquities,’ Amos iii. 2.

The more distinguished a people are by their privileges, the more highly aggravated are their iniquities : when we live in the midst of a perverse and adulterous generation, we are involved in their guilt if we do not mourn over their sins.

Professors of the name of Jesus, in our cities, have a deep hand in the trespass, by their not duly sanctifying the Lord’s holy day, by their careless attendance on the ordinances of his grace,—their sinful conformity to the world,—their neglect of family and secret prayer,—their unfruitfulness under the means of grace, and by their want of love to our Lord Jesus Christ, and to one another as his friends. If any should say they are altogether
innocent,

innocent, they only deceive themselves. No doubt the Lord's own people do fall in the common calamity, but they die in peace. Jofiah fell in battle, and yet died in peace; though it perhaps increased the pain of his wounds, that he sinfully plunged himself into the war which occasioned his death. The Lord pardons even when he chastiseth. 'Thou wast a God that forgavest them, though thou 'tookest vengeance of their inventions,' Psal. xcix. 8. To fly without danger argues the greatest timidity; to remain in danger when it might be avoided shews sinful temerity, and deserves to be called presumption rather than faith.

Object. 4th. "It is to be feared that those who
 " fled from our cities in time of the pestilence,
 " were only actuated by fear of loosing their lives,
 " and had no trust in the Lord."

Answer. Whatever was the motive, the Lord has over-ruled it as a mean of saving the lives of thousands; and thereby has in an awful manner rebuked all those cavillers, who have quarrelled with them. It is very dangerous to judge rashly of men's motives. There were doubtless some who weighed the matter in the balance of the sanctuary, and removed from the danger upon a deep conviction of

its being present duty. - Also among those who remained, some had not clearness in their mind that the Lord called them to leave their homes. Yet it would not be a breach of charity, to suppose that others were actuated by very selfish motives,—the expence attending a removal, and fears of loosing their property left behind, did doubtless prevent them from going away: of such some have fallen victims to their avarice, or lost their dear relatives. Those who had clearness in their mind to remove, and were shut up in providence to stay, were truly objects of Christian sympathy. We all have much ground to lament our not trusting in the Lord, and our putting means of safety in his place.

CONCLUSION. From what has happened these years bygone, the minds of many are dreadfully distracted with fears about the return of the pestilential and mortal fever. Indeed, when we consider the small evidences of its producing any gracious effects upon those who survive, we have nothing to hope upon the ground of our own goodness; but our God is merciful; ‘who can tell if God will ‘repent and turn away from his fierce anger, that we ‘perish not.’ Judgment is ‘his act, his strange act:’ but ‘he delighteth in mercy.’ The minds of many are exceedingly alarmed with a number of vain prophecies

prophecies and idle stories of visions, all portending the return of the dreadful malady ; but ‘ the Lord ‘ frustrateth the tokens of liars, and maketh diviners mad ; he turneth wise men backward, and ‘ maketh their knowledge foolish,’ Isa. xliv. 25. It is he alone who knows what is to come to pass, and it well becomes us, with resignation to his wil’, to wait the events of the holy providence of Him ‘ who does ‘ all things well,’ and performeth the things appointed for us.’ ‘ Say to the righteous, it shall be well ‘ with him,’—but ‘ wo to the wicked, it shall be ‘ ill with him,’ Isa. iii. 10. 11. Let us ‘ search ‘ and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord.’ And we ought always to study to be in a state of habitual and actual preparation for the enjoyment of that blessed estate, when ‘ God shall wipe away ‘ all tears from our eyes ; and there shall be no ‘ more death, neither sorrow, nor crying ; neither ‘ shall there be any more pain,’ Rev. xxi. 4. ‘ And ‘ the ransomed of the Lord, shall return, and come ‘ to Zion with songs, and everlasting joy upon their ‘ heads : they shall obtain joy and gladness, and ‘ sorrow and sighing shall flee away,’ Isa. xxxv. 10.

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